Elise Kraatila*

Roadmaps for saving the world? Construction and use of master and counter-narratives in programmatic climate fiction

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Abstract: This article discusses the capacity of climate fiction to construct master and counter-narratives as part of the logic of its storyworlds, and to use such narrative structures to both (1) represent climate change as a grand-scale problem requiring collective action and (2) function as environmentally oriented counter-narratives to currently dominant discourses. Drawing from both sociolinguistic and philosophical approaches to master or "grand" narratives, this two-pronged analytical approach is prompted by two thorny questions in environmental humanities and ecocritical literary studies. Firstly, can climate change, as a grand-scale complex system, be usefully represented in narrative form? Secondly, how can climate fiction contribute to public discourse around climate change, and to what effect? While these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered within the scope of one article, the inquiry they inform here yields new insight into how master and counter-narratives can be usefully employed, as narratological concepts, for investigating the expressive and persuasive potential of climate fiction. Regarded as literary devices, they can be fruitfully analyzed as tools for world-building that facilitate representing disruptive environmental and societal change as a matter of narrative contestation of the storyworld. Understood in terms of rhetoric, on the other hand, reading climate fiction as counter-narration provides a new framework for assessing the potential of such grand-scale storytelling as meaningful political action.

Keywords: master and counter-narratives; climate fiction; grand-scale storytelling; Kim Stanley Robinson

***Corresponding author: Elise Kraatila**, Faculty of Social Sciences and Tampere Institute for Advanced Study, Tampere University, Kalevantie 4, FI-33014 Tampere, Finland, E-mail: elise.kraatila@tuni.fi

1 Introduction: master and counter-narratives, the environmental crisis, and climate fiction

When it comes to defining what master narratives are, the strongest prevailing consensus seems to be that they are nebulous things. When they are considered, in the Lyotardian vein, the kinds of totalizing "grand narratives" of progress and human emancipation characteristic to modern thought (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: 37), their very power to impact our understanding of the world and legitimize ideologies derives from their implicitness – an appearance of being "natural", "eternal", or "universal". When they are discussed in the sociolinguistic vein prompted by the seminal *Considering counter-narratives* (2004) edited by Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews, they are usually regarded as culturally dominant structures of thinking that have been internalized to the point of becoming invisible. Either way, the ontological status of master narratives is vague and their very existence difficult to pin down by empirical analysis (Hyvärinen 2020: 18). They form a mostly unarticulated and unacknowledged backdrop of assumptions underlying our ideas and perceptions about what the world is like, what is possible or likely to happen within it, and what actions it makes possible or impossible for us (Bamberg 2004: 361). These invisible structures usually only become noticeable, as Matti Hyvärinen and his colleagues argue (2021: 120), when they are resisted by counter-narratives; indeed, rendering a master narrative visible exposes it to potential critique, and can in this sense be considered an act of countering in itself (cf. Meretoja 2020: 32). Similarly, the Lyotardian grand narratives arguably only become fully recognizable *as* narratives – that is, artificial structures of sense-making rather than the "natural" shape of reality – when they are discredited.

Whether understood as cultural scripts, dominant ideologies or hermeneutic sense-making tools, then, master narratives seem not just *untellable* (Hyvärinen et al. 2021) but, ironically, downright *unnarratable* as anything but objects of suspicion and resistance (cf. Prince 1988). Not only are they rarely considered worth articulating in distinct narrative form (Hyvärinen 2020: 19); the act of articulation itself also, at least implicitly, both trivializes them and subjects them to countering. From the narratological perspective, it is indeed debatable if master narratives can even be considered narratives proper at all (see Hyvärinen et al. 2021: 101; Meretoja 2020: 37–38 for contrasting arguments). As their cultural function is to normalize, generalize, and provide scripts for "typical" experiences or interpretations of reality (Andrews 2004: 4; Bamberg 2004: 360), they usually lack specific telling situations, do not recount particular sequences of events, and do not depict the kind of experience of living through a "storyworld disruption" that characterizes "prototypical narratives" as influentially described by David Herman (2009: 14). This means that even if

they were articulated, master narratives – unlike counter-narratives, which typically do involve such disruptive experientiality – would rarely constitute what might be called "compelling stories" (Mäkelä and Björninen 2022: 18). Therefore, articulating a master narrative into tangible textual form would be more liable to diminish its cultural power than to increase it.

Against this grain of theory, another adaptation of Jean-Francois Lyotard's initial conception of "grand narratives" stands out as entirely incongruous: an understanding of such narratives as essential *tools* for confronting the climate crisis, as formulated by the environmental philosopher Arran Gare (1995, 2001, 2016, 2017) and, closely following him, Andrew J. Corsa (2018). Gare has long been arguing that in order to facilitate effective collective action to mitigate the "environmental crisis", we need to "create and embrace" the kind of grand narrative Lyotard declared discredited by postmodernism: an idea of human history as a story of progress, with an imaginable *telos* or discernible goal towards which to aspire (Gare 2001; see also Gare 1995: 27). For Gare (2017: 149), that goal is an "ecological civilization", a utopian vision that can reveal "the contingency of the present order" and constitute "a call for action." In Gare's usage of the term, then, grand narratives are basically tools for future-oriented social dreaming that both facilitate imagining a better future for our world on a global and world-historical scale and stoke a collective desire to strive towards such a future. Corsa, in turn, elaborates that understood as such "tools which we can use to collectively organize and orient our actions and communities", grand narratives "can help us carry out the projects they describe and help us make the world a better place" (2018: 249). The approach to the "environmental grand narrative" in this Marxism-inspired branch of environmental philosophy is, in a nutshell, entirely normative. It is promoted as something "we as humans morally ought to embrace and seek to live according to" in order to facilitate global-scale cooperation (242).

It is clear enough that the conception of grand narrative – or narrative in general – in the works of these philosophers is informed by neither narratology nor sociolinguistics. It is, instead, fairly consistent with the popular celebration of storytelling as a "miracle cure" for all the ills of the world Maria Mäkelä and Samuli Björninen call "storyspeak" (2022: 16). The new grand narrative, proposes Gare, would do the heroic cultural work of replacing the environmentally destructive "false model" humanity has "of itself and its place in nature" espoused by capitalism (2017: 142), essentially forming a new and superior ideological foundation for organizing human civilization. The idea that storytelling determines our social consciousness, false or true, is taken for granted here; replace the "dominant story" of neoliberal capitalism (132) with a better one, and a better world is born. Such an optimistic view of the power of storytelling to contribute towards mitigating the climate crisis is, as Erin James notes (2022: 6), fairly central to environmental

humanities at large (see Clark 2015: 25 for critique). From a sociolinguistic perspective, the societal function of Gare's grand narrative is in this sense more akin to a counter-narrative than a master narrative (cf. Andrews 2004: 1–2), but Gare's usage of the term effectively obliterates any meaningful distinction between the two. On the one hand, it is framed as resistance to an alleged "dominant story" of capitalism; on the other, its power to disrupt the false worldview promoted by that "story" requires "humanity" on the whole to internalize it to a degree where it becomes a new master narrative. In this suggested dialectic, that new master narrative also seems to have a curiously tangible existence – with, as Corsa suggests, a "project" it "describes" – despite neither Gare nor Corsa ever addressing how that narrative should be articulated, and by whom, for it to become that ideological foundation for an ecological civilization in practice. How could it become a story that is both tellable and compelling enough to inspire that transformation? Despite being framed as a "tool" we should deliberately "create" (presumably by narrating it), the master narrative remains, in this sense, nebulous as ever.

This vagueness regarding the nature of the new "grand narrative" – and the haphazard usage of the term "narrative" at large (cf. Hyvärinen 2020: 18) – may suggest that Gare's theories have little to offer to any sophisticated analysis of master and counter-narratives, in fiction or otherwise. However, the idea of grand narratives as rhetorical and epistemic instruments that could be created and used – that is, *artefacts* – opens some interesting opportunities for investigating how such artefacts might also function as *literary devices*. Specifically, it raises the possibility of analyzing the construction and use of grand narratives in contemporary climate fiction as a matter of *grand-scale storytelling* that strives to represent world-historical perspectives and collective action. Questions about how, or whether, narrative fiction can represent such grand-scale phenomena have formed a central line of inquiry for ecocriticism and econarratology for some time (see James 2022: 6–14 for an overview). Climate change, as a wicked problem and a complex system, has been deemed by several scholars an "unnarratable" subject (Raipola 2019) that defies "narrative logic" due to lacking "human agency, clear-cut temporal-causal sequencing, and relatable storyworld particulars" (Mäkelä 2023: 233). These, notably, are also the reasons why master narratives are considered by Hyvärinen to lack tellability – at least in real-life, non-fiction storytelling situations. Could climate fiction, then, use these untellable master narratives to represent the unnarratable climate crisis in a way that trivializes neither and adds up to a compelling or even persuasive story?

Two fairly recent novels by Kim Stanley Robinson can, I propose, be fruitfully read as experiments in answering that question. *New York 2140* (2017) and *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) are both highly programmatic works of climate fiction, conveying overtly didactic warnings of dire futures and urgent calls to action. Set on

a Manhattan partially submerged by sea-level rise in the eponymous year, the former is the kind of cautionary tale set in a relatively distant future fairly typical to the genre, presenting a scenario that we could and should still strive to avoid (cf. Liveley 2022: 537). The scenario is not, however, particularly dystopian; instead of accounting disasters brought about by climate change or envisioning societal collapse, the novel focuses on the vagaries of business interests, real-estate speculation, and political campaigning that, somewhat absurdly, still shape the life in the drowned city. This absurdity is underlined by quasi-extradiegetic interludes of a narrator just called "the citizen" giving contextual information about how the disastrous sea-level rise came to be and, occasionally, tacitly admonishing the reader as one of the complacent and complicit idiots who let it happen (Robinson 2017: 139). *The Ministry for the Future*, by contrast, is set in a very near future – beginning in 2025, to be exact – and recounts efforts to mitigate the worst effects of climate change by the eponymous international government agency and various other actors. Instead of merely telling a cautionary tale, it presents a possible route to a best-case scenario; as Robinson himself has put it in an interview, he intended the novel to "argue" that "we should go for the optimum society, the best one possible, given where we are now, given everything" (Mikes and New 2023: 236). The ambition of this work of fiction, therefore, is nothing less than to provide a realistic speculative roadmap of sorts for saving our civilization.

In *New York 2140*, and, more pronouncedly, *The Ministry for the Future*, the struggle to create a sustainable societal order is presented in terms of a contest between (alleged) master narratives of neoliberal global capitalism and counter-narratives encapsulating a collective ecological consciousness. In *The Ministry for the Future*, the reader even gets to witness the counter-narrative gradually becoming a new master narrative; the ultimately somewhat successful response to the climate crisis, in the novel, hinges on this victory of a "narrative revolution", so to speak. From the perspective of considering master and counter-narratives as narratological concepts, these scenarios raise two interesting possibilities. Firstly, they provide experimental scale-models of sorts for interrogating how and whether political and ideological struggles around the climate crisis might boil down to a contest of grand-scale narratives fighting for mastery (cf. Phelan 2008). Robinson's fiction, I will argue, thus invites the reader to engage with a storyworld that is visibly and constantly subjected to such contesting narratives that both build it up and seek to disrupt it. This suggests that both master and counter-narratives, as literary devices, could be usefully understood in narratological terms as a matter of *world-building*, where the dialectic relations between the two can unfold into a grand-scale story of a world going through a transformation. Secondly, and reminiscently with Gare's engagement in celebratory "storyspeak", Robinson's fiction expresses certain optimistic faith in storytelling, and environmental counter-narratives in particular, as a means

for changing the world. In so doing, it also interrogates metafictionally its own potential to function as such a counter-narrative that, by operating on a scale grander than could be feasible in nonfictional context, can effectively and meaningfully resist an equally grand-scale master narrative of capitalism.

Robinson's fictions, in short, seek to both *represent* master and counter-narratives, and the dynamic between them, as part of their storyworlds and *function* as ecological counter-narratives to the capitalist *status quo* as part of their rhetoric. To explore what implications these two literary approaches to master and counter-narratives have for the present narratological and sociolinguistic theory of such narratives, I will first discuss in more detail, and with analysis of *New York 2140*, the idea of master narratives as a matter of world-building. Here, I argue for a conception of literary storyworlds that can accommodate the usage of these nebulous structures as semi-tangible literary devices. After that, I address in more depth how programmatic climate fiction like Robinson's work, particularly *The Ministry for the Future*, embraces an optimistic outlook to both the capacity of fiction to contribute something useful to efforts to mitigate climate change (cf. James 2022; Mäkelä 2023; Raipola 2019) and grand narratives as something that can be created and used to guide human aspirations on a global level. This twofold optimism expresses what I would call the utopian side of the so-called "storytelling boom" (Mäkelä and Meretoja 2022): a belief in stories as powerful tools for effecting positive societal change.

2 Shaping the storyworld: master versus counter-narratives and the problem of scale

The "grandness" of grand narratives, in the sense discussed by Gare, is a matter of not just dominance but also scale. These are structures that give shape to human history at large, on a species-level; they are tools that "transcend the lives of individuals" by which those individuals can "define their unique situations and contributions in relation to the broader project" (Gare 2001). People "living by" such narratives, Corsa elaborates, "would need to evaluate their own goals and projects – and even their own, personal narratives – in light of whether they can contribute to the grand narrative" (2018: 248). A similarly grand scale also typically characterizes master narratives in the sociolinguistic sense. Gare and Corsa's notions of how individual people would relate their small-scale, localized "personal narratives" to the collective "project" determined by the grand narrative closely resembles Bamberg's formulation of "master or dominant narratives" as implicit structures that "give guidance and direction to the everyday actions of subjects" who are "complicit" in them (2004: 360). The crucial difference here is that Bamberg's idea of complicity regards the

perpetuation of master narratives as something individuals mostly do without thinking (361), while Gare's formulation suggests that "contributing" to the grand narrative is a deliberate, considered choice. This, again, implies that the grand narrative he imagines is a highly tangible thing, articulated in a way that facilitates active participation. Although neither he nor Corsa, as noted, gives any proposal as to how such a narrative could be created in practice, this notion of participation points towards the conclusion that the grand narrative they envision resembles a counter rather than master narrative – but on a grand scale.

In contrast to master narratives, theories of counter-narratives developed for analyzing real-life storytelling tend to focus on how such narratives are used to resist culturally dominant master narratives on a relatively small scale. As Andrews formulates, these are narratives of individuals or social groups that do not "fit in" or recognize their lived experiences in a master narrative (2004: 1–2). There is thus, as Hyvärinen and colleagues note (2021: 102–103), an inherent asymmetry in this dialectic between master and counter-narratives: the former are grand-scale structures of thinking that function on a societal macro-level, while the latter offer resistance to them on much more localized micro-level, in situated acts of countering by specific people or groups. It is in these small-scale telling instances that counter-narratives take an articulated form and, in so doing, "invoke" the master narratives they resist (120; see also Bamberg and Wipff 2020: 78) – which in themselves remain untellable and even unnarratable partly due to their very scale. This asymmetry of scale suggests a fundamental power imbalance, where the small and localized counter-narratives can cast doubt to the master narrative's claims to cultural universality or "naturalness" (see Bamberg 2004: 360) but cannot effectively challenge its dominant position. Therefore, if the kind of environmental grand narrative envisioned by Gare is regarded as a counter-narrative – one that resists the "dominant story" of neoliberal capitalism – the most burning question is not how or whether such a narrative can be articulated, but how or whether it can function on a grand enough scale to effectively challenge the prevailing *status quo*. Is it possible, in other words, to construct a counter-narrative that is global rather than local, universal rather than situated, civilizational rather than personal?

Such questions do not seem readily answerable in any real-life context I can imagine. Climate fiction like Robinson's novels, however, can provide a speculative testing ground of sorts for considering the problem of scale in the dialectic relations and ontological asymmetries between master and counter-narratives. This, as I have argued elsewhere (Kraatila 2022), is because this kind of speculative fiction foregrounds its fictional storyworld as both an artificial, artistic creation and a global-scale entity designed to model workings of a possible reality on a systemic level (cf. James 2022: 28). Both *New York 2140* and *The Ministry for the Future* invite the reader to imagine worlds that, as scenarios about possible futures, are highly

conspicuous as invented, constructed artefacts (cf. Polvinen 2023: 20). Futures, after all, can only exist tangibly in the present as stories and other kinds of heuristic models we create in order to consider and discuss possibilities that are, by definition, yet to actualize (Beckert 2016: 9–10; Liveley 2019: 903). These artefacts are, equally conspicuously, created to facilitate anticipation of the consequences of anthropogenic climate change on a global scale (cf. James 2022: 37). What is at stake in *New York 2140* and *The Ministry for the Future* is not any individual character's "life story" (cf. Meretoja 2020: 34), or even a larger-scale societal struggle against oppression – it is nothing less than the fate of the world and everyone in it. This means, in other words, that the storyworlds of these novels read as grand-scale structures for thinking that are quite literally created by storytelling.

If we consider speculative climate fiction in these terms – as a matter of modeling a possible future reality, on a grand scale, by telling a story about it – then we can also regard master narratives, in such fiction, as world-building devices. They are largely implicit but constantly evoked structures that readers can infer from the story, the purpose of which is to make the storyworld intelligible (cf. Bamberg 2004: 361) and give it a sense of depth. In *New York 2140*, for instance, we can easily surmise that in spite of the catastrophic sea level rise that must have drowned numerous other major cities in the world besides New York, the global civilization has not changed very significantly. The international stock market is apparently still intact, as is the entertainment industry that supports people making glamorous careers as media personas; the US still seems to enjoy a position of great influence in the world, and its democracy has survived what must have been over a century of political upheaval. Even New York itself seems to retain its old significance – or at least its sense of self-importance – despite most of it now being underwater. On the whole, this sense of business-as-usual gives an unsettling sensation that Marie-Laure Ryan's "principle of minimal departure" (1991: 51) applies a bit too well in this world. The scenario implies a world-historical backstory of disasters brought about by climate change, contrasted by a depiction of a society curiously and somewhat absurdly unchanged by it. Even while remaining unarticulated, this grand-scale structure of the storyworld – its master narrative of sorts – gives it a discernible shape and meaning as a model of a capitalist society ludicrously resistant to change.

In the "prototypical" kinds of personal-scale narratives described by Herman, such inferences about the storyworld would remain relatively inconspicuous, helping the reader to make sense of the events in the story but not drawing attention to themselves. In *New York 2140*, too, the grand-scale scenario described above mostly provides context for the actions and aspirations of the characters making careers in finance and entertainment, getting involved in local politics, or running for congress. The occasional interruptions provided by the anonymous "citizen", however, break this pattern by deliberately calling attention to the bigger picture.

Here they are, for example, summarizing the global effects of two instances of rapid sea level rise in the preceding century:

> And so the First Pulse and the Second Pulse, each a complete psychodrama decade, a meltdown in history, a breakdown in society, a refugee nightmare, an eco-catastrophe, the planet gone collectively nuts. The Anthropocide, the Hydrocatastrophe, the Georevolution. Also great new options for investments and, oh dear, the necessity of police state crowd control as expressed in draconian new laws and ad hoc practices, what some called the Egyptification of the world, but we won't go there now, that's pessimistic boo-hooing and giving-upness, more suitable for the melodrama describing individual fates in the watery decades than this grandly sweeping overview. (Robinson 2017: 34)

Here, the citizen provides some world-historical perspective to the novel's events, giving the grand-scale structure of the storyworld an articulated form. While still not satisfying all Herman's conditions for a prototypical narrative – lacking a specific telling situation and openly rejecting any experiential dimension, for instance – this articulation nevertheless renders the master narrative upholding this storyworld highly conspicuous. It also ironizes the contrast between the world-historical catastrophe and the relatively business-as-usual depiction of characters' lives in the story's present by reflecting sarcastically on how such dwelling on past and far-away tragedies might be considered mawkish and inappropriate. Besides the obvious sarcasm, the absurdity of such a position is compounded by the fact that the world-historical tale of catastrophic disruption that is emphatically refused telling here seems like it would arguably make for a more tellable story than the relatively banal events in characters' lives that occur in the novel's present.

Would the sequence above, then, be more appropriately described as an articulation of the master narrative giving shape to the storyworld on the whole, or a grand-scale counter-narrative that questions the legitimacy of that shape? It functions somewhat like the former by providing the reader with some epistemic access to the systemic workings of this world, and somewhat like the latter in its framing of the still-standing capitalist global order as an absurdity. As the storyworld on the whole has clearly been designed to model that order as a deeply flawed system, this amounts to a case in point of the articulation of a master narrative being, in and of itself, an act of countering. Putting the grand-scale reality of the storyworld into a tangible textual form exposes it to scrutiny as *just* a narrative – and narratives, once recognized, can be challenged, countered, and perhaps, with enough critical mass, even replaced by new ones (Meretoja 2020: 32). Here is a snippet from the "citizen's" interludes that explicitly pits two versions of the global ecocatastrophe against each other:

> All that happened very quickly, in the very last years of the twenty-first century. Apocalyptic, Armageddonesque, pick your adjective of choice. Anthropogenic could be one. Extinctional another. Anthropogenic mass extinction event, the term often used. End of an era. […]
>
> But hey. An end is a beginning! Creative destruction, right? Apply more police state and more austerity, clamp down hard, proceed as before. Cleaning up the mess a great investment opportunity! Churn baby churn! (Robinson 2017: 144)

The first description of the event evokes an environmentalist interpretation of the world-historical disruption, laced with technical terminology that gives it some intellectual flair and sense of scientific authority; the second one is rendered in a thoroughly parodic string of neoliberal slogans that simultaneously invokes and ridicules a free-market-capitalism approach to the disaster. Together, they represent a contest between two grand-scale narrative structures by which the reader may make sense of the storyworld – the former of which is obviously suggested as superior, and the latter of which is clearly positioned here as a dominant discourse the citizen's narration seeks to resist and discredit (cf. Hyvärinen et al. 2021: 103).

The storyworld itself, as a literary artefact, thus becomes conspicuous as an *object of narrative contestation*. On the whole, it can be read as a speculative model of how such contestation produces competing versions of reality, how these versions are positioned against each other, and how they could potentially gain or lose dominance over each other. Because the world at stake in this contest is an overtly fictional creation, the grand-scale narratives fighting for mastery over it also become articulated as a matter of fiction. Both master and counter-narratives, here, come across as tangible parts of the structure and logic of the storyworld – whether they are holding it up, disrupting it, or seeking to restructure it. Grand-scale storytelling in speculative fiction like *New York 2140* can, this shows, render the dialectic dynamics between master and counter-narratives in the societal and political realm tangible and readily examinable in a manner that would not be possible without a conspicuously artefactual storyworld. Such fiction can thus provide *heuristic models* for investigating possible forms of those dynamics in real life as well, in a controlled, purpose-built scale-model setting. In the "speculative narrative inquiry" facilitated by these models, as it were, the concepts and theories of master and counter-narratives can be tested for their usefulness in analyzing fiction, and fiction can be tested for its usefulness for reviewing and refining these theories.

The outlook to master and counter-narratives as a matter of world-building facilitates discussing the relations between master and counter-narratives in relatively tangible terms, as literary artefacts. It can shed light, for instance, to the roles master narratives have to play in the narrative dynamics of a storyworld undergoing a disruption, the contests and shifting positions between master and counter-narratives in conveying that disruption, and the blurring of the distinction between

the two in struggles for mastery. The centering of storyworld as a grand-scale object of narrative contestation also allows for analysis of such dynamics in a somewhat symmetrical situation where both master and counter-narratives are regarded as constructed objects, and both have analogously world-shaping scope and power. From the perspective of climate fiction and its potential to construct environmental grand narratives, such symmetry is crucial. It opens the possibility that a counter-narrative to the current, destructive *status quo* – or alleged dominant discourses holding it up – could be articulated on a grand enough scale to offer not just resistance and delegitimization, but a serious challenge over the dominant position itself. Climate fiction telling stories of world-disruption on a planetary and world-historical scale could, then, effectively function as an act of such grand-scale counter-narration. Next, I will discuss the way *The Ministry for the Future* frames itself as such an act, and how it uses its narratively contested storyworld to model a possible pathway towards a sustainable future.

3 Partaking in public discourse: climate fiction as grand-scale counter-narration

Both *New York 2140* and *The Ministry for the Future* are fairly typical works of climate fiction in their openly programmatic aspirations. As James notes, "'cli-fi' is a genre that tends to signal loudly an intention to prompt readers to think about and perhaps even reassess their understanding of anthropogenic climate change and their relationship to the world-in-crisis in which authors write and readers read" (2022: 37). Markku Lehtimäki, similarly, observes that authors of "environmental fiction" habitually include "informative, instructive, didactic, and pedagogical stuff" into their literary works as "an intentional feature of their fictional rhetoric" (2019: 493–494). That is also frequently the spirit in which this kind of fiction is promoted and, presumably, read. My copy of *The Ministry for the Future*, for instance, is covered with blurbs celebrating it as "a rousing vision of how we might unite to overcome the greatest challenge of our time" and a "must-read for anyone worried about the future of the planet". This praise speaks to a culture where climate fiction is deemed important not just for its power to educate us about implications of climate change (see Vermeulen 2017: 869) but also its capacity to provide alternative, better models for thinking about our world and humanity's place within it. In other words, the great promise of climate fiction, for many, seems to lie in its supposed capacity to forge that new "grand narrative" envisioned by Gare, by which we might develop a new collective environmental consciousness. The genre in general, and Robinson's novels in particular, can thus be conceived of in terms of constructing and

embodying such a narrative, often framed more or less explicitly as a counter-narrative to capitalism.

In this kind of outlook, climate fiction becomes perceived, perhaps first and foremost, as an instrument for counter-narration: a tool for discrediting the destructive dominant discourse. Such instrumentalization of fiction can be taken to signal not just a notion that contemporary fiction has a duty to contribute something useful to the effort to mitigate climate change, but also a belief that storytelling is a powerful force for changing hearts and minds. This ethos of commitment expresses, I think, a utopian tendency within the popular "storytelling boom" described by Mäkelä, Meretoja, Björninen, and others. With that boom, the idea of the human being as *homo narrans* who lives and makes sense of the world by stories has become mainstream (Mäkelä and Meretoja 2022), and the understanding of "narrative" in popular usage has expanded to encompass far broader and hazier structures of thinking than narratological definitions usually capture (Mäkelä and Björninen 2022). For fiction, developments like these mean, firstly, that the traditional fiction–non-fiction distinction becomes blurred, as works of literature are increasingly perceived as acts of participating in public discourse. Both Robinson's novels embrace such a role, occasionally incorporating an openly didactic tone as well as essayistic elements that can read more like science communication than fiction. Secondly, with the broadening public understanding of what narratives are and do comes the opportunity, seized by *The Ministry for the Future* in particular, to not just stage a narrative contestation of a fictional storyworld but also make a case for itself as a viable grand-scale contestation of *status quo* that challenges the current dominant discourse for mastery.

New York 2140, as demonstrated above, engages in some counter-narration in the citizen's chapters, but its relatively far-future, post-disaster storyworld is designed to model a warning, not solutions or alternatives. As the catastrophic sea level rise is already a foregone conclusion in this world, the counter-narrative is limited to critiquing the capitalist master narrative, casting it as the ideology that wrecked the planet. As an instrument for countering prevailing structures of thinking, the novel's most effective angle of attack arguably lies not in this critique, but in its forceful invitation for the reader to consider the world-historical big picture in the first place. The citizen directly reprimands the reader for supposedly being "anxious to get back to the narrating of the antics of individual human lives" and exasperated by the "expository rants" that interrupt it (Robinson 2017: 141). This expectation of a lack of readerly interest frames the grand-scale story of the world, and its catastrophic disruption, as a critique of not just the capitalist world order but also, metatextually, the parochial scope of human interest. By highlighting this tension between the global and localized aspects of the storyworld, *New York 2140* raises the problem of telling a grand-scale counter-narrative in a compelling

way – and resolves it, for its own purposes, by effectively punishing the reader for their supposed lack of interest in the bigger picture. The grand-scale storyworld disruption, where the most interesting part of the story would arguably lie, is presented as little more than a tantalizing ellipsis: the reader is provided only limited epistemic access to it, and their possible desire to engage with it on an experiential level is not only frustrated but overtly ridiculed by the narrator as ghoulish taste for "melodrama" (Robinson 2017: 34).

The Ministry for the Future experiments with a very different rhetorical strategy for its construction and use of an environmental grand-scale counter-narrative. Like *New York 2140*, it presents a storyworlds structured by a master narrative of a global society in thrall to destructive ideologies of capitalism, corporate greed, rampant inequality, and indifference to both human and nonhuman lives. Unlike *New York 2140*, however, it gives a detailed account of that world going through a grand-scale disruption, as this prevailing structure is resisted, challenged, and ultimately replaced by an emerging counter-narrative that encapsulates an awakening environmental consciousness on a global scale. This is, in short, a story about a world that gradually shifts from being determined by a destructive master narrative to being guided by a relatively sustainable and ethical one. The novel has a collage-like structure where chapters depicting the work of the Ministry for the Future alternate with chapters providing one-off accounts of the actions of various people and groups across the world, as well as essayistic chapters laying out, in a directly argumentative way, various problems of the neoliberal world order and what could be done about them. On the whole, the local-level storylines, often narrated in first-person plural (e.g., Robinson 2020: 37–39, 513–517) or with whole nations as their subjects (e.g., 125–127), come together to boost and illustrate this argument, adding up to a coherent counter-narrative on a grand scale. On its most tangible level, this is a fairly straightforward narrative of policy changes and finance reforms being implemented in the next few decades, framed as a plausible and science-based scenario for future developments; plausible, that is, if there is an organizing body – or a storyworld model – to map the way.

In its representation of a narratively contested storyworld, *The Ministry for the Future* constructs a speculative scenario where a counter-narrative (or a cluster of counter-narratives) becomes the new master narrative. This is presented as a new structure of sense-making gaining dominance all over the world, where people's values and conceptions of good life and just society begin to draw from and reproduce a new, environmentally sustainable pattern (cf. Andrews 2004: 1). In one of the novel's last chapters, this underlying ideological foundation for the new social order is made explicit in a depiction of global celebration of "mamma Gaia" that aims to instigate "a new Earth religion" devoted to worship of the planet; the event is described to seemingly "emerge out of the Zeitgeist" and be participated in by three

billion people (Robinson 2020: 537–540). The story on the whole is similarly geared towards depicting collective or institutional actions that bring about systemic changes in the very structure of the storyworld. Although some characters in *The Ministry for the Future* are rebels, revolutionaries, and outsiders, the most heroic ones – if heroism is measured by the metric of effecting positive change in the world – are representatives of institutions like government agencies, financial regulators, and universities doing tedious and thankless work to gradually improve things. These bureaucrat, politician, and scientist characters are mostly rather dull and have little in the way of tellable personal stories, but they play integral roles in a grander-scale story of societal change unfolding and reshaping the storyworld.

In its construction of a grand-scale counter-narrative, then, *The Ministry for the Future* balances resistance to the invoked capitalist master narrative with explicit, if qualified, faith in existing global power structures to serve as a conduit for positive change. The novel, in other words, challenges the master narrative in its own terms, seeking to constructs a scenario where some major structures of thinking regarding how the world works are redirected rather than deconstructed. These structures include faith in science and scientists as the best authorities on how to handle the climate crisis, trust in well-meaning meritocratic organizations to guide political action on the global level, and even grudging belief in finance as the underlying force determining the course of society at large. These are all explicitly framed as culturally established, dominant structures and endorsed as such. Here, for instance, the narrator of one of the essayistic chapters argues for the necessity of established financial systems for implementing a fairer and more sustainable economic system:

> One scary thing, there has to still be money, or at least some exchange or allocation system that people trust, which means the already-existing central banks have to be part of it. Sorry but it's true, and maybe obvious. Even if you are a degrowth devolutionist, an anarchist or a communist or a fan of world government, we only do the global in the current world order by way of the nation-state system. […] It is what we've got now, and in the crux, when things fall apart, something from the old system has to be used to hang the new system on, hopefully something big and solid. Without that it's castles in air time, and all will collapse into chaos. (410)

A crucial part of the rhetoric of this passage is a sense of negotiation: a plea for the reader, who is assumed to read the novel expecting something more radically disruptive of the current *status quo*, to be sensible and practical. The narrator immediately goes on to concede that the existing system is "a social agreement, nothing more", and a "creepy" one at that, but insists that in order to any economic "Plan B" to ever become reality, it needs to stay in place for now. The new master narrative structuring the world order, as it were, must bend but not break the old one.

This rhetoric of negotiation and pragmatism is a key feature of *The Ministry for the Future* as an experiment in functioning as a grand-scale counter-narrative. By having institutions and government organizations, rather than individual activists, as its main heroes, the novel negotiates its call for radical action with a relatively conservative vision of how and by whom that action should be implemented. By appealing to common sense and repudiating "castles-in-the-air" utopianism as above, it claims epistemic authority to envision a future that is both desirable and realistically achievable. This claim of high epistemic status is further bolstered by long-winded and overtly technical explications of the mechanics of global warming (29–30) and melting of glaciers (80–82), as well as economic theories (e.g., 72–76), designed to demonstrate that the author of this scenario has done his due diligence regarding the facts on which the suggested solutions are based. All of these rhetorical strategies are aimed to enhance the persuasive power of the narrative, on the whole, as a contribution to the public discourse on mitigating climate change. Further framing the narrative as such a contribution, the novel also includes some passages that seem like pre-emptive defenses against anticipated criticism. There is, for instance, an essay discussing ideology as "a necessary feature of cognition" needed "to make sense of thing in ways that allow one to decide and to act" and ironically noting that in "common usage", it is "what the other person has, especially when systematically distorting the facts" (41). The essay thus counters possible accusations of bias in the novel's decidedly left-leaning proposals by both affirming the epistemic necessity of ideology and tacitly discrediting any critic's claims to ideological neutrality.

The contribution Robinson's novel thus proposes to make to the public discourse is a realistic, pragmatic roadmap for mitigating the worst effects of climate change, framed and defended as serious-minded, fact-based, well-considered, and actionable – and no more "ideological" in its presuppositions than any other narrative representation of the future. It is also designed to be appealing, evoking a certain degree of optimism with its insistence that necessary institutions are in place, that there is enough knowledge to act upon, and that the possibility of a better future lies latent in our present. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator even suggests that the "break point in the history of both humans and the Earth" is already in our past:

> Indeed it can never be emphasized enough how important the Paris Agreement had been; weak though it might have been in the start, it was perhaps like the moment the tide turns: first barely perceptible, then unstoppable. The greatest turning point in human history, what some called the first big spark of planetary mind. The birth of a good Anthropocene. (475)

In this retrospective passage, set at the "58th COP meeting of the Paris Agreement signatories", the narrator suggests that we might already be on track to save our civilization. This expresses an ethos of willful optimism, forcefully countering the

present atmosphere of skepticism surrounding the Paris Agreement with a story that reframes it as a world-historical turning point. In the rhetoric of the novel on the whole, the optimism of envisioning such a positive future-historian perspective – in contrast to the damning voice of "the citizen" of *New York 2140* – thus amounts to repudiation of the pessimism and hopelessness evoked by the dominant discourse. In terms of the present capitalist master narrative, it is tacitly suggested, the Paris Agreement can be little more than an act of political posturing; in terms of the counter-narrative embodied by *The Ministry for the Future*, it could be reimagined as the disruptive moment that will end up rewriting the world order.

When the dialectic between master and counter-narratives is constructed as a matter of representing a narratively contested storyworld, as described in the previous chapter, they can both be regarded as simply fictional artefacts: alternative structures for that world. When the work of fiction also aspires to function as a grand-scale counter-narrative, however, the ontological status of the master narrative it counters becomes more nebulous again. Similarly to *New York 2140*, *The Ministry for the Future* invokes a master narrative as an underlying structure of its storyworld that gets disrupted by the counter-narrative; however, a key underlying assumption of the novel's rhetoric *as* a counter-narrative is that the reader takes the storyworld as a credible representation of narratives structuring our reality as well. To function as an effective counter-narrative, in other words, the novel needs the reader to agree that there is a grand-scale capitalist master narrative behind the environmental crisis that needs to be countered. The existence of such a narrative is thus a matter of either persuasion or an already shared worldview; without either, the exercise in serving as a counter-narrative is likely to fall flat. For the purposes of my analysis of the novel's rhetoric above, I sidestepped this thorny issue of ontology by taking my cue from Hyvärinen in considering the master narrative something the novel's narration invokes by countering it. In practice, however, it seems to me that for the countering to be persuasive, the reader should perceive the master narrative as something that both preexists and merits it. Building a compelling counter-narrative on a grand scale, in this sense, ultimately relies on appeal to a collectively shared belief system.

4 Conclusions

In this article, I have conducted a two-pronged approach to analyzing the construction and use of master and counter-narratives in Robinson's climate fiction. The first approach, focusing on the usage of master and counter-narratives as means for building a narratively contested storyworld, investigates the potential of such fiction to use these narrative structures as literary devices to tell stories about a changing

world on a grand scale. The second one, in turn, interrogates the potential of climate fiction to function as a counter-narrative that not just resists the current dominant discourse but challenges its mastery as a structure of thinking. This dual approach has been informed and directed by two major questions within environmental humanities and ecocritical literary studies. Firstly, can fiction find ways to represent climate change in all its unnarratable complexity and scale, or tell compelling stories about it that surpass individual human perspectives and experiences – and if so, what kinds of narrative techniques and devices would that require? Secondly, can we assume that climate fiction has potential to educate and persuade readers about the ramifications of climate change, inspire environmental thinking along new patterns, or galvanize us into action – and if so, what rhetorical strategies does it utilize for such purposes? These are thorny, complex, and much-debated questions that I do not presume to answer within the scope of this article. However, exploring these lines of inquiry in the light of the concepts and theories of master and counter-narratives points towards some tentative insights and, on the flipside, provides a new vantage for reviewing those concepts and theories.

Concluding from my analysis of *New York 2140*, I suggest that master and counter-narratives can function as devices of fictional representation that direct attention to the storyworld as a literary artefact: a model of a world in peril, contested by competing narratives. Understanding this contestation of the storyworld in terms of grand-scale narratives vying for mastery sheds useful light to how a story about the fate of the world on the whole, rather than individual human characters' experiences of it, can be narrated as a compelling story. A literary narrative that constructs and uses fictional master and counter-narratives as part of its world-building can, therefore, render aspects of our reality that would resist narrativization in a nonfictional context both legible and tellable. On the other hand, analyzing the dynamics of contesting and disrupting a fictional storyworld in these terms can also help us rethink the dialectic relations between master and counter-narratives at large, in the form of a speculative thought experiment of sorts. In particular, viewing the storyworld as an object of narrative contestation can provide a useful outlook to the asymmetry of scale in the sociolinguistic understanding of the dynamic between master and counter-narratives – and reimagine "narrative mastery", as it were, as something that can be strived for as well as resisted. From the vantage of pragmatic environmental thinking regarding narratives as instruments for positive change, such striving for mastery appears a crucial aspiration of counter-narration.

In this sense, programmatic climate fiction that seeks to contribute towards building an environmentally oriented grand-scale structure of thinking blurs the distinction between master and counter-narratives as key part of its rhetoric. As my analysis of *The Ministry for the Future* demonstrates, the grand-scale narrative of the emergence of global environmental consciousness relies on a rhetoric of countering

for its impact, invoking a master narrative of capitalism to serve as a foil to oppose. Here, the invocation of that master narrative as a destructive structure of thinking is itself inherently an act of countering. However, the novel also frames itself, as a counter-narrative, in terms of a new way of organizing and making sense of our reality – asking the reader, in essence, to try it on as a potentially useful master narrative by which they could make sense of their life and think about the future. Whether understood in terms of its grand, universalizing scale or its claim to hegemony, therefore, the mastery of the narrative is framed as a matter of its instrumental usefulness for imagining and aspiring for a better future. Mastery, in other words, is ultimately claimed here by normative stance-taking: a suggestion that the narrative the novel contributes to the public discourse on climate change mitigation is pragmatically useful and ethically sound. *The Ministry for the Future* may admittedly be a fairly unique piece of climate fiction regarding the forcefulness of such normative logic; most works of such fiction, after all, tend to focus on impending disasters rather than solutions. Nevertheless, my analysis suggests that conceiving of works of climate fiction as acts of counter-narration on a grand scale may provide new insight into how such fiction, at large, functions as part of public discourse on climate change.

My discussion of master and counter-narratives as literary devices and instruments for pragmatic environmental thinking has been negotiating between theories of such narratives developed in the field of sociolinguistics on the one hand, and the adaptation of Lyotard's conception of "grand narratives" in Gare's environmental philosophy on the other. Even though these strains of theory conceive of the dialectic of master and counter-narratives in mutually incompatible ways, I find that bringing them into a dialogue through analysis of climate fiction still yields useful possibilities for considering such narratives from a narratological perspective. Gare's understanding of grand narratives as instruments for creating collective environmental consciousness, while being more reminiscent of the popular "story-speak" than sophisticated narrative theory, nonetheless brings to a useful focus the quality of such narratives as grand-scale objects to be constructed and used. Applied to analysis of climate fiction aspiring to tell stories about the fates of the planet and the deeds of humanity at large, this outlook creates room for considering master and counter-narratives both as literary world-building devices and rhetorical structures of fictional narratives. These results, I hope, will open new fruitful lines of inquiry about the forms and functions such narratives can take in the poetics and politics of contemporary fiction at large, as it seeks to confront the world-disrupting events that may be waiting ahead.

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